

SEPTEMBER 19, 1985

Thunderstorms have been building up every afternoon over the Shortgrass Country.

We had seven afternoon previews before the moisture finally moved onto the ranch. On the day our luck changed we were weaning our calves. The atmosphere in the corrals was heavy and sultry. Thick brown layers of dust hung right at a man's chin level, and swarms of black hornflies broke through it to perfect the misery and make the cattle nervous and hard to manage.

Without the dust and heat, I'd have been distracted. The first bunch of cattle we'd gathered that morning had come out of a pasture that has an unlaned public road. Just as we'd started them toward the house, the neighbor to the west had driven up behind the herd. He followed along in his pickup, idling his motor, and visiting while we drifted the cows along to the pen.

The main topic was a windstorm that had blown part of the roof off his barn the evening before. He said a freak wind blew off one end of the roof while on the other end of the barn he went right on milking his old cow without missing the bucket one time.

According to him (and I was careful to get the facts), the cow didn't kick or wheel from the trough; a guy visiting him went right on talking, and his 11-year old stepson didn't flinch or give an inch of ground.

After we finished work, I took off in a hard rain to go to the scene of the story. I knew it was too late to get factual information from the witnesses, because I learned a long time ago that unless you catch a Shortgrasser before he's had time to polish his testimony, you might as well settle for a fiction writer. So my objective was to look over the milk cow and see that she hadn't been branded in Oklahoma where they have bad wind storms, or maybe had lost her sight and hearing up on the gusty plains of Texas.

In that rain it was hard to reconstruct the action. She was a plain, cream colored Jersey cow about 11 hands high at the shoulder and willing to raise a smut-colored calf. The barn roof was lying out on the ground, and had there been any deep tracks where anyone had run over a fence, the hard rains had washed the signs away.

I awakened this morning to the sound of calves bawling in the feedlot and a soft mist falling over the land. I wished for once when a big story broke, it'd happen when I wasn't busy working sheep or cattle. You need to be right on the spot to check the witnesses. It seems like I'm always too late to get the human side of the story.